

VZCZCXRO5120
RR RUEHLN RUEHSK RUEHVK RUEHYG
DE RUEHDBU #0301/01 0691332
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 101332Z MAR 09
FM AMEMBASSY DUSHANBE
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 0127
INFO RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE
RUEHBUL/AMEMBASSY KABUL 0037
RUEHDBU/AMEMBASSY DUSHANBE 0200

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 DUSHANBE 000301

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [EAID](#) [PCUL](#) [SOCI](#) [EFIN](#) [TBIO](#) [TI](#)

SUBJECT: BRINGING HOME NEW IDEAS -EXCHANGES IN ACTION

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¶1. Summary: City planners, loan managers, librarians and hospital administrators - groups of each of these have visited the United States in the last seven months under the USAID-funded Community Connections program. This program for mid-level professionals provides many benefits. Participants get new ideas that help them tackle their job with new energy. It helps create networks of professionals to support ideas and share experiences, and it gives key people in Tajikistan a better understanding of the United States. For a country as remote and isolated as Tajikistan, it can literally open up new worlds. End Summary.

A Range of Benefits

¶2. What do city planners, loan managers, librarians and hospital administrators have in common? In the last seven months the USAID-funded Community Connections Program has sent a group of ten of mid-level professionals from each specialty on a three week visit to a mid-size U.S. city for professional cultural program. While in the United States participants stay with an American host family. The city planners visited Jackson Mississippi, the loan managers Bluefield, West Virginia, the librarians visited Lincoln, Nebraska and the hospital administrators were in Charlotte, North Carolina. Participants are drawn from around Tajikistan, and as a rule do not speak English and have limited, if any, travel abroad.

Pre-Departure Nerves

¶3. Though pleased to have been chosen, before going many are apprehensive about what they will experience in the U.S. Negotiating the cultural and linguistics barriers of home stays is of high concern. They tend believe that hostility towards those from Muslim countries is high and expect to experience some personal animosity. They are unsure that what they learn in the United States will really be relevant to their life at home, and their travelling companions are strangers.

The Big Change

¶4. When they return home they come straight from the airport where they debrief USAID, Embassy and program staff as well as local press about their trip. Though travel-worn and jet-lagged, the change is palpable. They express great warmth for America

and have established what they expect to be enduring friendships with host families and others in the host communities. They have forged friendships and the basis of a network among themselves, and they have gotten new ideas about how they can improve their work and their service to communities. Almost invariably, among the first questions that journalists ask is how what they saw in the United States. can apply in Tajikistan, but the participants are ready with answers. Often what may seem commonplace to us, has struck them with the force of revelation.

Southern Hospitality for Planners

15. For the city planners, who visited Hattiesburg as well as Jackson, perhaps the most striking aspect was community engagement--the town hall meetings, the publications of notices and periods for public comment, explanations by officials of the rational behind planning decisions, and coverage by the press of planning issues. One participant noted that a City Council member had a meeting in his ward for voters to discuss a proposed city project. They also were interested in how a variety of issues are taken into account--traffic, noise, demand of for additional city services, whether water and sewage or police patrolling, environmental impact, revenue implications and financing. Another interesting aspect was the close collaboration between the private sector and city government. Though Tajik law and practice is considerably different, most participants felt they saw a number of things that could be usefully adapted to in Tajikistan to make city planning more inclusive and effective.

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Banking Crisis Backdrop

16. With the banking situation reaching a crisis point during their October 2008 visit, the Americans involved with this trip felt it was perhaps a bit ironic to be passing on our wisdom to Tajiks at this point. The group, however, remained unfazed by the events unfolding around their ears and participants were mainly struck that Federal Reserve officials still took the time to meet with them during a stop in Washington D.C., despite attending to the crisis. They were interested in community banking and project finance, and the thing that clearly made the biggest impression was the concept of credit bureau that would give banks better information about the credit history of borrowers and allow them to more accurately judge creditworthy and asses risk. A majority seemed determined to work together organize something similar in Tajikistan, judging it as the most important next step to developing the banking sector. Ideas for improved staff training were another area which yielded rich results.

Librarians Shake off the Doldrums

17. The Program Coordinators said pre-departure the librarians probably the most gloomy set of participants yet seen. The post-Soviet years have not been kind to libraries and their keepers as they fell to bottom of the resource chain and have been neglected and ignored. In contrast, since coming back they have been one of the most active alumni groups, getting together and sponsoring a seminar per month on various library issues. Aside from the sea of red shirts at the annual Oklahoma/Nebraska Football game, the librarians perhaps were struck most by drive-by/night depository, where patrons could return books

without actually checking-in. In fact, similar practices that symbolize the level of trust in U.S. society are often some of the most striking things to participants in all programs. They also marveled at "community center" aspect of public libraries-with children's programs, movies, music and software, and accommodation for the homeless. Though highly taken with level of technology in U.S. libraries, perhaps the most relevant concept was treating patrons as customers rather than supplicants.

Preventive Medicine Strikes a Chord

18. Like their colleagues from Mississippi, the hospital administrators were pleased to get the chance to see the Ocean and felt the warmth of Southern hospitality. Professionally they seized on preventive medicine, and especially promoting a healthy lifestyle to reduce the need for medical care, important concepts to promote in Tajikistan. Given the weak state of health care in the country, they felt helping people avoid illness and accident was even more urgent. Proper nutrition, breast-feeding, potable water, anti-smoking campaigns, occupational safety, anything that would reduce the chances that people need medical treatment was worth looking at promoting in Tajikistan. One doctor noted she was surprised but pleased to see that handwashing campaigns were a permanent ongoing feature in high-tech U.S. medical facilities despite the high levels of education among staff. This is notable because, because Tajiks often feel that donor handwashing campaigns are patronizing, implying that Tajiks are too unsophisticated to know about such a basic practice.

19. Comment: Although exchanges are mainly seen as long-term investments, we can see visible results almost immediately from these exchanges of mid-level professionals. They return to Tajikistan with a much better understanding of and positive feelings toward the United States and take these impressions home with them. They have almost always had their minds opened to new possibilities that let them take a fresh look at how to organize their work and interact with the community. They have a built-in support network of professional contacts who share their experience and understanding, and who can provide moral and practical support if they try and implement change. The program also provides support to program alumni to remain in touch with each other and with U.S. contacts. For a country as remote and isolated as Tajikistan, the program literally opens up a new world.

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